

Development of self-directed learning skills with web 2.0 tools

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Abstract

Today's world and our professional lives have changed tremendously. New skills and competencies have replaced those needed a decade ago. Expectations of future employees are also changing, posing educators a new task - developing learners' self-directed learning skills and readiness for lifelong learning. In the present paper I am intending to take a deeper insight into developing self-directed learning skills with Web-2.0 tools in language classes. My focus will be on the ways of making learning process conscious. I will view different skills and knowledge necessary for directing the learning process. With examples from my 15-year-long experience as an English teacher I will take a look at the modern technological tools that support young people in becoming self-directing learners. The high school students (16-18 years old) were observed in the EFL classes over two years. Their behaviour, independent choice of learning tools (Web 2.0 tools) and methods were recorded. They were interviewed at the end of both school years to enable analysis and self-assessment. Although students confirmed that taking responsibility in the learning process was not habitual for them, they evaluated it as a precious experience and saw a possibility to continue developing their own selfdirecting learning skills.

Self-directed learning and lifelong learning have both been important keywords in educational discourse for a long time already. A person's continuous interest in his surrounding life and developments, his readiness to explore and learn new things makes him an active citizen, enhances his social inclusion, personal development and employability.

It could be argued whether it is possible or necessary to train people as lifelong learners. As long as people live, work, communicate and participate in social life, they also continue learning and acquiring new knowledge and experience. Usually no special attention is paid to it and most people almost never think about it or consider themselves lifelong learners. This is a natural, inseparable part of being human. However, making conscious the essence of lifelong learning, its possibilities and impacts, it is possible to convey processes and achieve better results. But the question is - what is the process of making learning conscious? Which skills and knowledge does it take to direct the learning process of one's own? Are there any modern technological tools that support a learner in becoming a self-directing learner? The following treatment is trying to find answers to these questions.

Having been working as a secondary school teacher for almost 20 years, I have always wondered about the students' lack of interest in directing their own learning process. They are used to being led by teachers but when they are given the possibility to choose their own way, pace, method etc, they feel insecure and show no interest. When they start their way at school they are mostly driven by curiosity, but very soon it disappears and is replaced by unquestioning obedience or indifference. If we want our students to develop self-directing learning skills, if we want them to take control of their own learning activities, the first things to be done are restoring their interest in the learning process, and arousing their will to take responsibility.

The first step I took with my students when starting to develop their self-directing learning skills was locating their position in the 4-level learning model (also known as Conscious Competence Matrix or

Conscious Competence Ladder) considering the field or certain area in which they want to improve. The following table presents the Conscious Competence model from level 1 (Unconscious Incompetence where the learner doesn't know that he doesn't know) to level 4 (Unconscious Competence where the learner has automatized the skills).

	Unconscious	Conscious
Incompetence	<p>Learner: At this level you are unaware of the lack of skill, and your confidence may therefore far exceed your abilities.</p> <p>Tutor: At the beginning of the process, the learners may be unaware of their own lack of competence, and may need to be made gently aware of how much they need to learn.</p>	<p>Learner: At this level you find that there are skills you need to learn, and you may be shocked to discover that there are others who are much more competent than you which may drop your confidence.</p> <p>Tutor: During this stage, you will need to provide plenty of encouragement, tolerate mistakes appropriately, and do what you can to help people improve.</p>
Competence	<p>Learner: At this level your new skills become habits, and you perform the task without conscious effort and with automatic ease. This is the peak of your confidence and ability.</p> <p>Tutor: Although this is the ideal state, you will need to make sure that people avoid complacency.</p>	<p>Learner: At this level you acquire new skills and knowledge. You put your learning into practice and you gain confidence in carrying out the tasks or jobs involved. You are aware of your new skills and work on refining them.</p> <p>Tutor: At this stage you need to keep people focused on effective performance of the task, and give plenty of opportunities for them to get practice.</p>

(Table 1. Conscious Competence Matrix)

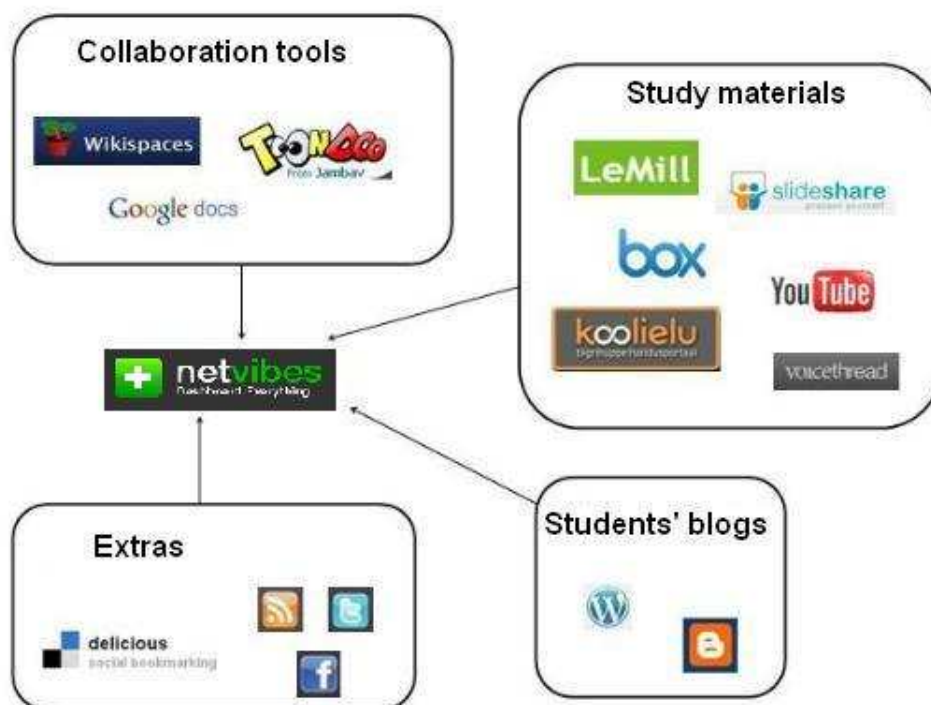
Mapping the skills and knowledge is of crucial importance in the context of self-directed learning. It takes a critical analysis of one's preliminary knowledge and the ability to see the target that the learner wants to achieve. As the next step the object has to be defined - what I need/want to know (why?), what are the expected outcomes, how I can achieve this (resources, strategies), what is the evidence that I've learned it, how fast I can complete the task, how I like to be evaluated. To make the process easier for the learner to follow, these notes could be written down in the form of a learning contract. At the first attempt the goals set may not be very realistic for the amount of material or the tense schedule. In this case the learner could be advised that he set intermediate targets with shorter deadlines, which are better to be followed and evaluated. For students, filling in the learning contract may be a very difficult task when they are not used to planning or directing their learning process. They may have very little experience of being involved in the decision-making process whereas choosing the content of studies and designing their own learning environment gives them the sense of ownership over their learning.

One of the many ways to perceive the learning process becoming conscious and to encourage students to take responsibility over their studies is to teach them to create a personal learning environment (PLE). This is a virtual learner-centric Web 2.0-based environment that supports the learner to set his learning goals, manage his learning process and it provides the learner with communication tools. PLEs represent a shift from the model in which students consume information through independent channels to a model where they draw connections from a growing matrix of

resources that they select and organize. PLEs provide more independence but also more responsibility for learners.

My idea was to give the students a model of an open learning environment with all necessary tools and communication possibilities. Working with them in such kind of "virtual classroom" was supposed to give them the idea how to build up their own personal learning environments.

Our virtual classroom was designed with Netvibes aggregator. The main part of it was filled with students' blogs where every now and then they had to post their hometasks (essays, messages, analysis, stories etc) and comment-evaluate their peers'. The other tools were the Web 2.0 tools imported to Netvibes: Google dictionary, links, Lemill study materials, exercises uploaded via Boxnet, audio comments/feedback via Voicethread etc.



(Figure 1. The landscape of the open learning environment.)

All these tools can very easily be aggregated to the Netvibes environment. The choice of tools selected for our classroom depended on the tasks. When some of them were not used at the moment, they were removed and maybe added again later when a new task demanded it. The aim was to create an environment as flexible and learner-friendly as possible. On the one hand the student has to find all necessary tools easily, on the other hand the "classroom" cannot be overloaded with redundant "noise". However, the artefacts of students' individual tasks as well as group works were saved and stored for later usage. It is a very important aspect of self-directed learning - each learning activity and development makes a dent that a learner should have access to. This way he can see and experience the feeling of creating or learning it over again. This is also the reason why learners are advised that they store their artefacts into e-portfolios. It is also very important to keep the class environment user-friendly, because if we like our students to start creating their personal learning environments in the similar way, their first experience with the open learning environment has to be positive, otherwise they will not find it worth being followed.

Having used the Netvibes classroom with my secondary school students (aged 16-18) for two years, I also asked for their feedback. According to my expectations it was positive. Students enjoyed learning

in a different way. They found blog tasks where they wrote different texts, illustrated them with pictures and videos and commented on their peers', interesting and thought-provoking. They approved the situation where all materials were always at hand, they could choose between different alternatives and they could consult and discuss problems with their teacher and peers outside the traditional classroom. They were happy about the chance to explore and use new Web 2.0 tools which they had never used before and they were very positive about the perspective to keep using them in the future. This sort of virtual classroom can be considered an example of an open learning environment that encourages its users to start designing their own personal learning environments serving their needs. When doing this the learner analyses his skills, needs and usability of the tools picked, and this way develops his skills of self-directing learning.

Developing students' self-directing learning skills is not the easiest task, and the teacher's personal example may not always be enough. However, going through the procedure with students step-by-step, starting with asking the questions about the learners' goals and needs, proceeding with choosing the suitable tools and methods up to the best ways of evaluating the process and reflecting its progress will lead to a more conscious attitude to the learning process. Furthermore, having a central role in the decision-making process grows the learners' sense of responsibility and willingness to take control over their learning process.

Resources:

<http://www.selfdirectedlearning.com/majorprinciples.html>

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newlSS_96.htm

<http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7049.pdf>

<http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/ATC/Collaboratory/Idea/contractbenefits.html>